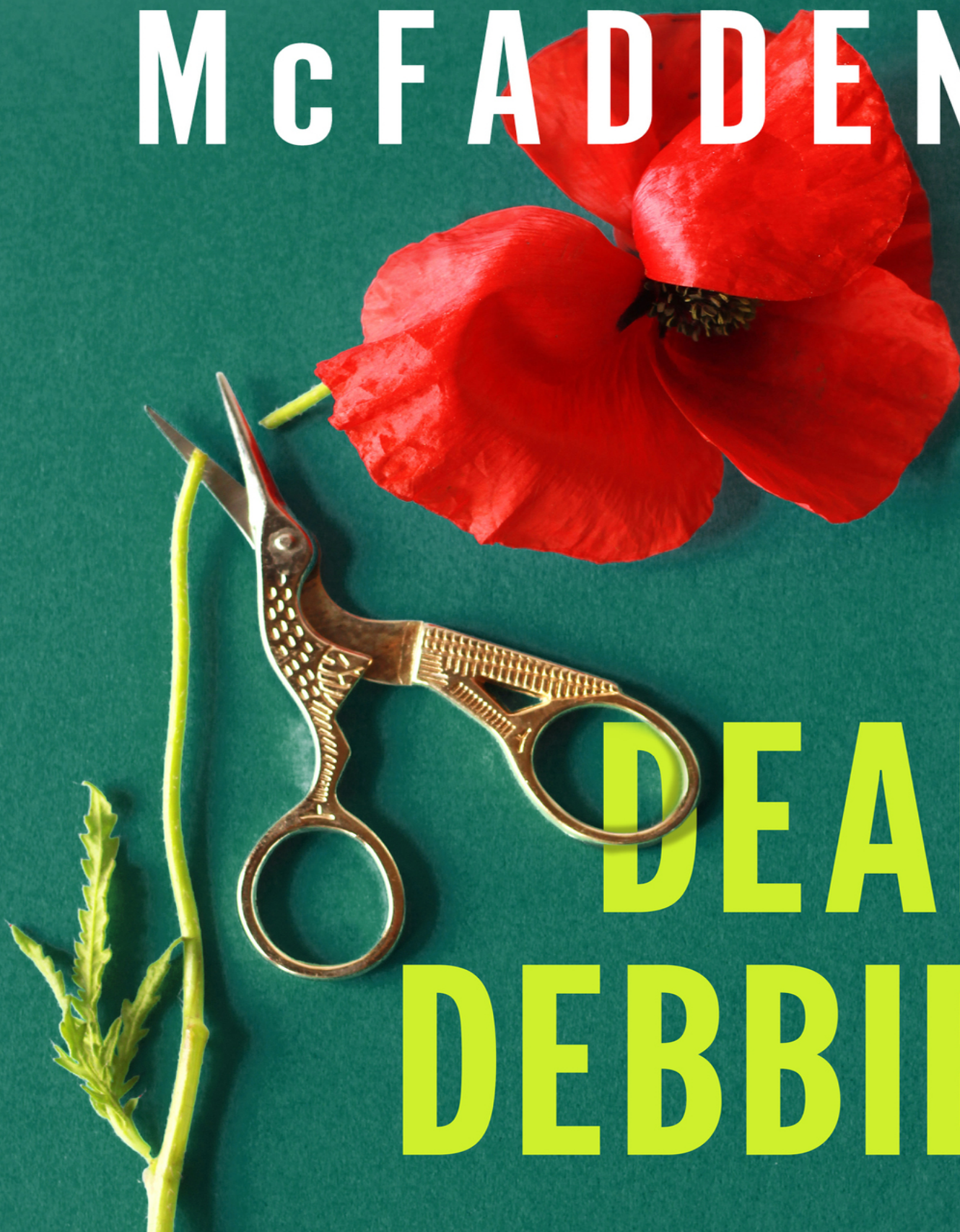


#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FREIDA
McFADDEN



DEAR
DEBBIE

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Published by Poisoned Pen Press, an imprint of Sourcebooks

1935 Brookdale RD, Naperville, IL 60563-2773

(630) 961-3900

sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I am momentarily distracted from my thoughts of Coach Pike by the more immediate issue of what on earth happened to my relationship with my firstborn. I remember a time when I used to make pancakes for Lexi in the morning. I would go all out. I formed a smiley face on each individual one using blueberries or, if it was a special day, chocolate chips. When Lexi saw those smiley face pancakes (especially the chocolate chip ones), her eyes would light up. She would eat all the blueberries or chocolate chips first, and then she would smother the stack in maple syrup. After a few bites, she would look up at me with a sticky, happy smile. *You make the bestest pancakes in the world, Mommy!*

I take another bite of my cereal, wondering if there's any activity I could suggest we do together. Maybe a shopping trip. Lexi has always loved to go shopping, even when she was little, and now she still loves clothes. Finding the clothes she likes might be a challenge though.

Maybe I could offer to take her to a pajama store. Is there such a thing? If there isn't, they should make one. It's a million-dollar idea.

A car horn blasts from outside the house, loud enough that both of us startle. I can't make my daughter smile anymore, but that horn does the job. It's her boyfriend, Zane, who recently turned eighteen and got his full license and now can drive her to school every single day.

He never comes inside the house though. He only blasts that damn horn loud enough to let everybody in the neighboring towns know that he has arrived. It might even be a little louder than my chewing.

"Gotta go," Lexi chirps.

My daughter grabs her backpack off the floor, which is heavy enough that when she's wearing it, she walks with a slight backward tilt. She opens her mouth as if to tell me goodbye, but then she remembers her rule about not speaking to me in the morning, so she instead darts out the door without another word.

I've only finished about half my cereal, but I don't have much of an appetite anyway. I follow the path through the living room that Lexi took to the front door, knowing she didn't bother to lock it on her way out. Why should she, since I always lock it behind her.

I am always here for my family. Always.

I peek out the window at the broken-down red Kia that is pulling out of my driveway. Whenever I see that car, I think to myself that he should just drive it straight to the town dump and leave it there. I'm not thrilled about

the fact that my oldest child is being transported to high school in that piece of junk, but I recognize that I don't have much of a say in the matter.

My thoughts about the boy driving the piece of junk are even less charitable.

I catch a glimpse of Zane as he pulls onto the road in front of my house. He has long, shaggy hair and is skinny as a rail, even though the times he has been in my house, he has devoured a small truckload of food. If half of my refrigerator has been emptied, it means Zane has been by for a visit. Especially if the refrigerator has been left slightly ajar and the toilet seat is up. Not to mention the fact that I'm pretty sure he vapes. I don't even entirely know what vaping is, but I know I don't want my daughter dating a boy who does it. Not that I have a choice.

But most of all, I don't like the way he looks at Lexi. There's something in his expression that makes me uneasy. It's something I've seen before—a memory that I can't ever block out.

Lexi and Zane have been dating for about four months, and I was ready for it to be over three and a half months ago.

But I can't forbid her to date him. She is seventeen years old, and that won't go well. If I tell her not to see him, she'll only see him...harder. No, the smart thing to do is to wait this out. She's a smart girl, and she'll wise up. Eventually, Zane will be gone.

And if not, well, I intend to protect my daughter. Both of them. Whether they like it or not.

I am about to return to the kitchen but stop when I notice another flash of movement out the window. It's my neighbor Brett Carlson, walking down the driveway that separates our houses. Actually, he's not so much walking as *stomping*. He's making his way toward our front door. In another minute, he's going to be pounding on it.

This day is about to get interesting.